



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

The bright lights of Alexandria

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Image: The football stadium at G.W. High School. Historicaerials.com.

In the April 14, 1956 edition of the circus trade paper *The Billboard*, notice is posted that Frank Wirth signed a contract to produce the annual Kena Temple Shriner's Circus at the George Washington High School Football stadium. The paper noted that Wirth promised Alexandria 20 acts and that units of the Department of Defense would augment the cast.

Wirth agreed to three days of performances, starting on June 21 of that year. Alexandria residents at the time would not have been surprised, as three ring circuses were a regular event at the George Washington High School Stadium.

Built in 1935, the stadium originally seated 5,000 spectators. The stadium also had lights, allowing the school to host high school football games on Friday nights. Seats were upgraded from wooden bleachers to concrete structures that supported wooden seats on steel frames. In 1949, the Chamber of Commerce spent \$37,000 to increase the seating capacity from 11,500 to 15,000.

As the Shriner's Temple Circus showed, activities in the stadium weren't limited to high school football. In 1949, a game between Quantico Marine base and Virginia Tech was attended by President Harry Truman and other notable figures. Truman was ostensibly in town to participate in Alexandria's Bicentennial Anniversary festivities.

An even bigger crowd came to the by then aging stadium in 1965. Shortly after signing his then record-breaking \$427,000 rookie contract, Joe Namath made his New York Jets debut at the G.W. High School stadium on Aug. 7 in a preseason game against the Houston Oilers, now the Tennessee Titans.

The big occasion meant that the stadium was temporarily expanded to seat 25,000, with bleachers being brought in for the game, which doubled as a Kena Temple fundraiser. According to contemporary reports, Namath played well, throwing for 113 yards and leading his team to 13 points in one half of work. In the end though, the Oilers won the contest, 21-16. Less than four years later, Namath would lead the Jets to a shocking upset of the Baltimore Colts in Super Bowl III.

While Namath's career took off after his appearance at G.W. High School stadium, the fortunes of the stadium reversed. In 1969, the same year that Namath and the Jets won the Super Bowl, the stadium discontinued night games due to falling attendance and disorderly crowds. The next decade, all Alexandria high schoolers were moved to T.C. Williams, and G.W. High School was repurposed as





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

George Washington Junior High, which didn't have the same demands for spectator seating capacity as its predecessor.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.